

Trimontium

A brief historical context:

The Romans first invaded the island of great Britain around 40 AD, occupying the southern counties of England. In keeping with other such territorial land grabs in search of gold, silver, tin and lead, they intended to dominate the whole of the island of Britain and subjugate its inhabitants, a diverse mix of many tribes whom the Romans called Caledonians.

By 80 AD Roman soldiers had reached quite far up into Scotland, supplying their troops from seaports along the East coast, moving as far north as Inverness. At this point their campaign stalled, failing to overcome the local tribes who fought a vicious guerrilla campaign of hit and run.

It could be argued that, after 80 AD, the most northly outpost of the Roman Empire was a fort based at Trimontium (named after the three Eildon Hills near Melrose).

During serial occupations, abandonments and rebuilding exercises, Trimontium was the base for a substantial cavalry troop, used to provide a rapid reaction force to subdue the indigenous tribes of the area, peoples called the Selgovae and the Votadini.

During its period of prominence, Trimontium was also a centre of trade and craftsmanship attracting a civilian population of up to five thousand people from all over Britain and mainland Europe bringing their skills and expertise while supplying food and labour to sustain their occupiers.

In a later development, an Arena was added, an arena which was later discovered to be the most northly and most remote arena in the Roman Empire.

Many of the soldiers who occupied Trimontium over the period of 80 AD to 185 AD had been sent from Hadrian's Wall. This massive Roman construction was commenced in 122 AD and completed in 128 AD (only six years!). It is 57 miles from west to east and lies sixty miles to the south of Trimontium.

In a later occupation, Trimontium was a staging post for supplies moving north from York and Hadrian's Wall to construct and maintain the Antonine Wall (built around 142 AD and abandoned around 165 AD. The Antonine Wall is 39 miles from west to east and about eighty miles north of Trimontium.

From around 80 AD, over its hundred years of intermittent occupation, Trimontium grew, diminished and was abandoned seven times until around 185 AD, when it was deliberately

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destroyed for a final time by the Romans themselves when they retreated south to Hadrian's Wall.

From 185 AD the Romans lost interests in the north of Britain and over the next thirty years until they final left in left in 215 AD, retreating back to the European mainland.

However, the Romans did leave a vast legacy of Laws and Practices which persisted for centuries to follow. Most importantly, during their occupation, the Romans introduced Christianity, a new and vibrant religion which flourished long after they had left, creating a unity of thought and culture which persists to the modern era.

Against this background, so to our tale:

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The autumn was mild, wet and depressing. Flavius Marcus Pinnetto (generally called Marcus or Marcus Minori after his father Marcus Augusto Pinnetto) dismounted and led his gelding Starrus into the shelter of the of the new stables, part of the expanding fort at Trimontium. The young man had been riding hard, keen to get home, keen to settle the matter.

In the distance he could hear a girl singing. Marrid Hender was nineteen, a year older than him. She lived on a farm to the south of Trimontium and walked to the fort each day to clean and cook for the Pinnetto family.

He removed the light saddle from Starrus and hung it up to dry then took a handful of straw and began to dry him off. It had been drummed into him that his horse must always be treated well, with respect.

The singing became louder.

Starrus neighed a welcome. Marrid reached past Marcus with an apple for the horse and her long hair brushed his face. It smelled of lavender.

He stepped back, just clear of her. She reached up and took the stiff bristle switch from its peg and began brushing the horse. Starrus neighed with pleasure, tossing his mane and pushing his head down nuzzling into the front pocket of her apron hoping for a second apple.

'Marcus, would you like some food? I have a broth ready? And fresh bread and some of my gran's cheese? There's good beer too, fresh from my uncle's brewhouse.'

'Yes, later.'

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He approached her cautiously, worried she might reject him again. Placing his hands on her shoulder, he turned her to face him. Her head dipped, hiding her eyes behind her hair.

'Marrid, will you please consent to be my wife. I have asked my father and he has agreed. I have asked your father, just an hour ago and he agreed too. Please say yes.'

The girl lifted her head and looked up at him. He was a full head taller. He saw tears in her eyes.

'Yes, Flavius Marco Pinnetto, I Marrid Hender consent to be your wife. But I have one condition which I hope you will agree to, if you can arrange it.'

'What is that?'

I want you to get your father to make me a Citizen of Rome before we wed. I want to be sure that our children are full Citizens of Rome so that when you return to Rome, we shall travel with you and not be forced to remain here.

With that said, she slipped past him and ran off into the misty rain.

Impasse

'Mother, I need your counsel, please.'

Fuastina Camilla Agricola, was resting in a darkened room, recovering from a dark headache (migraine). She smiled at her only child, the apple of her eye. In her eyes he was perfect. Clever, dutiful, obedient, a fine horseman, a first-class Bowman, excellent with a spear and brave in combat at the arena during mock battles. Because of his rank as son of the Secretary of Trimontium, Flavius Marcus was expert as the best of the legionary cavalrymen. Though not yet a soldier, he often rode out with the patrols to show solidarity with the men posted here on rotation from Hadrian's Wall.

'Come, Flavius Marcus, sit beside me. This is about Marrid?'

'So, you know?'

'A guess. Tell me.'

Marcus recounted his tale.

'Well, Flavius Marcus, your father will not be pleased. He is planning to match you with Athena, the daughter of Senator Augusto Aureletto. They have been in correspondence and, from reading these letters without his knowledge, I know the deal is almost done.'

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'Yes, he told me. I said I did not want to return to Rome, that I want to remain here, to serve him as his Secretary. I told him that I want to marry Marrid and he agreed. Her father has agreed, also.'

'Yes, Flavius Marcus, but this would be a 'local marriage', for your convenience, to let you wed her with honour. It would not be a proper marriage, not a marriage recognised by Rome.'

'Oh, I thought if we were married, when we have children she would become a Roman Citizen.'

'No, Marcus, that is not certain. It might happen in time depending on your future progress, but it might not.'

'But father has given me permission to wed Marrid.'

'But he cannot grant her Roman Citizenship because he has promised you to Athena.'

'This is the first I've heard about her. But I have heard of Senator Aureletto. They say he is not a nice man.'

'Flavius Marcus, be careful not to repeat that. Your father's future is in Augusto's control. Now, listen while I tell you a secret that you must never mention to anyone. I am not supposed to know but your father owes Augusto a great deal of money.'

'From gambling debts?'

'Yes. Dice. It's your father's weakness. It is why he was forced to accept this post here, in Trimontium. It was supposed to be for five years only. Originally, we were posted to York but again your father built up gambling debts. After you were born, we were forced to accept a post here. I begin to think I will never be allowed to return to my home in Italy, that I will never see my family again.'

'Is there no way out of this? How much does father owe?'

'Too much! But you must never mention it to him. He is a proud man and, in most other ways he is a good husband.'

'What can I do?'

'I don't have an answer.'

'Does your cousin in York, Governor Agricola know of father's situation? Would he help me?'

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'Ah, yes, my dear second cousin Sextus. I imagine that Sextus might well know of your father's weakness. And, despite his reputation for fierceness, he has a soft heart. Yes, I will write to him at once. It would be best if you take the letter yourself. There is a supply troop due to return to York tomorrow. You could join it for protection.'

'Will it work, Mamma?'

'We must pray to Ceres that he will grant your plea.'

'What will father say? Will he endorse my visit?'

'Yes, I think so. Leave that with me.'

Special Pleading

When Flavius Marcus Pinnetto arrived in York he went directly to the Headquarters building and presented his letter of introduction at the Gatehouse. After inspection of this letter, signed by his father, he was admitted into the warmth and asked to wait.

In his satchel Marcus was carrying a jewelled bracelet which belonged to his mother. This bracelet had once belonged to Governor Agricola's mother, a wedding gift to her favourite grandniece.

After an absence of about an hour, a clerk visited the Gatehouse, noted the visitor's request, checked his credentials and read the short note from Marcus Augusto Pinnetto, Secretary of Trimontium, wrote out a chit and sent Flavius Marcus to the Bull's Head tavern to await the outcome of his request for an interview with Governor Sextus Calpurnicus Agricola.

The following morning a messenger arrived with a note from the clerk. Marcus was invited to attend the Governor for dinner at six o'clock on the following day.

Bathed, perfumed and wearing his best clothes and sandals, Marcus was ushered into the great man's presence. An aide removed his short ceremonial sword and left, leaving him alone with the great man.

The short, rotund man stepped forward and hugged him warmly then stood back two paces to look him over:

'Flavius Marcus Pinnetto my dear boy, how are you! You are almost full grow, even taller than your father. How is your dear mother? Tell me, is the Arena completed? Did I read somewhere that you are the current champion, first in all five events? And how is the weather up there, among the Selgovae and Votadini. Do you have them back under our

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thumb? Are the new arrangements for supplying the Antonine Wall working as they should? Is that why you're here, to ask for more relief bullocks?'

'No, your honour, I bring a letter and a gift from my mother?'

The Governor opened the purple bag and studied the bracelet, and raised his eyebrows quizzically.

Marcus spoke:

'Your grandmother gave this to my mother on her wedding day. Mother wants you to accept it as a gift, as a memento of happier times. She explains this in her letter.'

Governor Agricola held the letter close to a candle, reading it under a glass amplifier. It was a long letter and he read it twice, stopping several times to check what had been written.

Marcus watched and waited, knowing it was not his place to speak.

The Governor closed his eyes and began to hum to himself, lost in a reverie, remembering a time when his life was simpler, when he had tended his grandfather's vineyard helped by a beautiful younger girl called Faustina Camilla Agricola.

'And is your mother well, Marcus?'

'Sir, I cannot mislead you. She becomes frailer with each passing month. She yearns to return to Italy but fears it may never happen. My father has become distant. He has a local woman, a girl, he keeps in the settlement. Their marriage is dead.'

The Governor remained silent. He rose and began pacing around the room, muttering under his breath. Then he stopped:

'Yes, a common tale, sadly. So, Marcus, tell me of this girl who will not marry you unless she is elevated to become a Roman Citizen.'

Marcus told everything he knew of Mairid:

That she was from a good family, a large family which was industrious and productive, with extensive apple orchards, fruit bushes, fields of cabbages, onions, turnips, leeks and garlic. Livestock including pigs and hens and sheep and goats and a small herd of work horses for haulage and to power tread mills.

Of her cleverness, her kindness, how good she was with his mother, how she cared for others who were down on their luck.

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Of her ability playing the flute and the lyre and the sweetness and trueness of her singing voice.

And that she could read and write in Latin and in her own language.

While Marcus explained, Governor Agricola lay back with his eyes closed, smiling. When Marcus finished, the short man rose and began to pace around the room. This time he was humming. Then he stopped, his decision made:

'Yes, your mother was right to ask me. Let me recall my personal secretary and we will deal with this before we dine.'

Quid pro Quo

The following morning Marcus joined a supply convoy heading north for Trimontium, final destination Castlehill on the western edge of the Antonine Wall.

In his satchel he carried the bracelet for his mother with a personal note. He also carried a warrant, duly sealed with Agricola's signature and ring impressed on purple wax, a document which certified Marrid Hender Agricola of Trimontium as a Citizen of Rome.

Unsaid, this act was a gift to repay Marrid for her dedication in the service of his childhood friend, Faustina Camilla Agricola, the girl he might have married had events worked out differently.

Marcus also carried a small fortune in gold ingots from Governor Agricola, an amount calculated to clear his father's gambling debts.

In return, Marcus had given his promise that, if the opportunity arose, he would visit the vineyard overlooking Lago Trasimeno to the north and east of Rome to check that all was satisfactory or, if not, to render assistance to the Governor's family.

On his return to Trimontium, Flavius Marcus Pinnetto and Marrid Hender Agricola, both Citizens of Rome, were married with due pomp and ceremony.

Trasimeno

Years after the withdrawal from Britain, Marcus and Marrid settled in the villa they bought from the Agricola family and began a new chapter in their lives. At this stage they had three sons, Flavius, Marcus and Sextus (a difficult birth) after which there were no more children.

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Initially they concentrated on restoring the vineyard, developing it to produce red wine, white wine and grappa. Later, using the profits from the vineyard they developed a stud farm breeding horses which they used to supply their haulage business using small, tough horses rather than bullocks. Later still, they opened a small children's home which offered sanctuary to orphans of Roman soldiers whose 'local wives' had died in childbirth.